

Pyotr Vershov
**THE LITTLE
HUMPBACKED HORSE**



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HUMPBACKED HORSE**

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П. Ершов

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PART ONE

Now the telling of the tale begins.

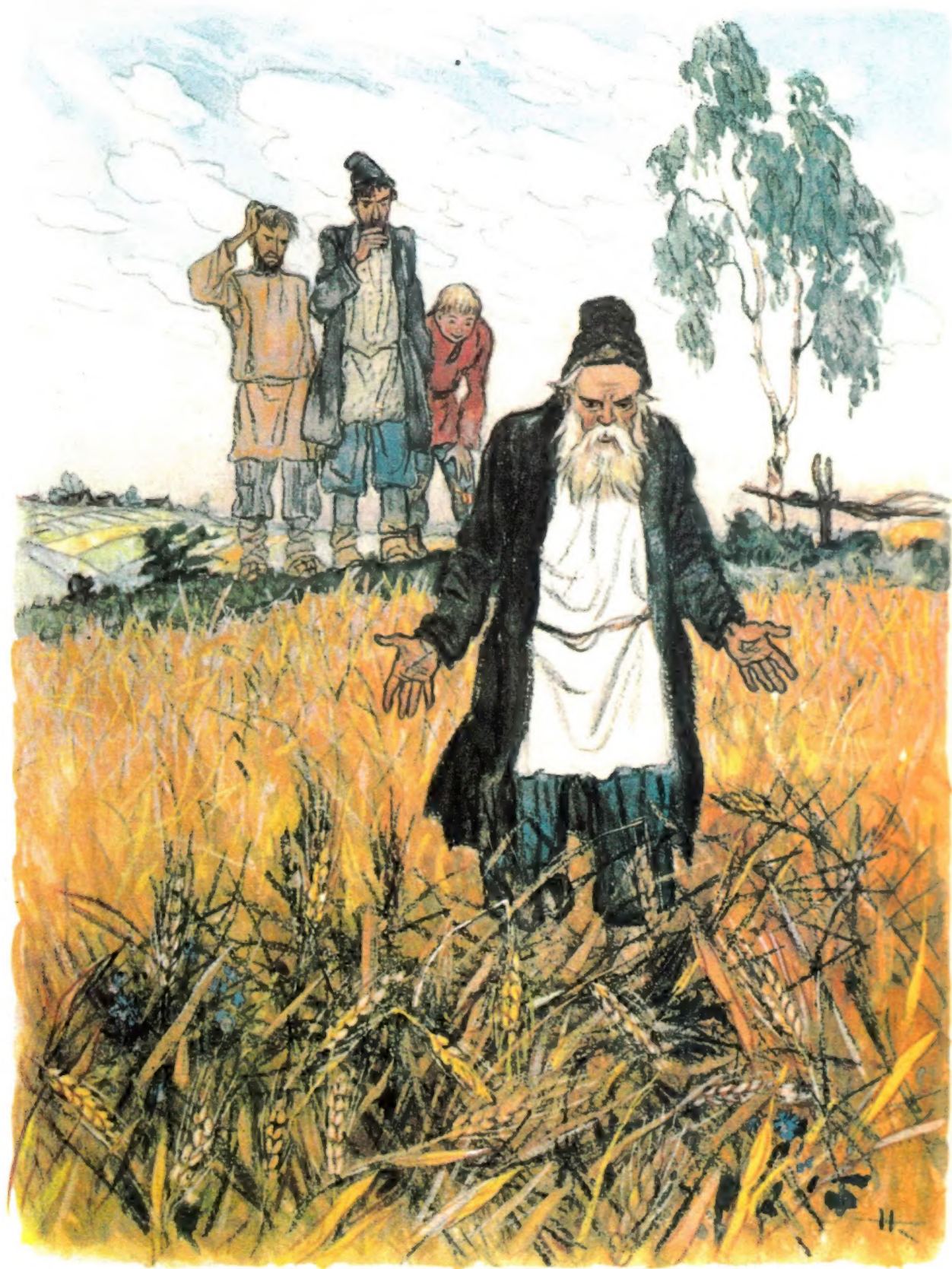
Past the woods and mountains steep,
Past the rolling waters deep,
You will find a hamlet pleasant
Where once dwelt an aged peasant.
Of his sons—and he had three,
Th'eldest sharp was as could be;
Second was nor dull nor bright,
But the third—a fool all right.
Now, these brothers planted wheat,
Brought it to the royal seat,
By which token you may know

That they hadn't far to go.
There they sold their golden grain
Counted carefully their gain
And, with well-filled money bags,
Home again would turn their nags.

But upon an evil day,
Dire misfortune came their way—
Someone, 'twixt the dark and dawn,
Took to trampling down their corn;
Never had such grief before
Come to visit at their door;
Day and night they sat and thought
How the villain could be caught,
Till at last it dawned upon them
That the way to solve the problem
And to save their crops from harm
Was, each night to guard their farm.

As the day drew near its close,
Up the eldest brother rose
And, with pitchfork, axe in hand,
Started out his watch to stand.
Dark and stormy was the night,
He was overcome with fright
And, of all his wits deprived,
In the nearest haystack dived.
Slowly night gave way to day;
Our brave watchman left his hay,
And, with water from the well,
Soused himself—then, with a yell,
Pounded on the cottage door;
And you should have heard him roar!

“Hey, you sleepy owls,” cried he—
“Open up the door—it's me!



I am soaked right to the skin!
Hurry, there, and let me in!"
Quickly they the door unbarred
Letting in their sentry guard.
Then they started questioning—
Had he noticed anything?
First, in prayer he bent his head,
Cleared his throat, and then he said
(After bowing left and right):
"Why—I never slept all night!
And I really wonder whether
There was ever fouler weather!
Cats and dogs it poured, no joking!
Feel my shirt—it's simply soaking!
Oh, it was an awful night!
But, then, everything's all right."
Father praised his son with pleasure,
Said: "Danilo, you're a treasure!
You have served me well, my son,
I can only say, well done!
You have proved that you're a man
And have not disgraced me, Dan!"

As next day drew near its close,
Up the second brother rose
And, with pitchfork, axe in hand,
Also went his watch to stand.
Such a fearful frost set in,
That he shivered in his skin.
Teeth a-chatt'ring in his head,
Freezing, from his post he fled.
All night long, bereft of sense,
He walked round his neighbour's fence.
What a dreadful night he passed!
But the morning came at last,
Found him on the porch once more

Pounding on the cottage door.
“Hey, you sleepy owls,” yelled he,
“Let your brother in—it’s me!
I am frozen, frozen quite—
It was dreadful cold last night!”
Quickly they the door unbarred
Letting in their sentry guard.
Then they started questioning—
Had he noticed anything?
First, in prayer he bent his head,
Through his teeth, he slowly said
(After bowing left and right):
“Why, I never slept all night!
And I really wonder whether
There was ever colder weather!
It was cold, I’d have you know—
I kept running to and fro—
Wasn’t it a chilly night!
But, then, everything’s all right.”
And his father said with pleasure:
“You, Gavril, are a treasure.”

Evening once again drew near,
Now the third should don his gear,
But he never turned a hair,
Sitting on the oven there,
Singing with his foolish might:
“O, you eyes, as black as night!”
Then to coax and beg Ivan
Both the elder sons began
Bade him go and guard the grain;
They grew hoarse—but all in vain.
Father finally said: “Here,
You just listen, Vanya dear,
Go on watch, and if you do,
This is what I’ll do for you:

I shall give you beans and peas,
And some pictures, if you please.”

At these words, Ivan climbed down,
Donned his coat of russet brown,
Pocketed a lump of bread
And on sentry-go he sped.

Night fell and the white moon rose.
On his beat Ivan now goes,
Looking sharply all around;
Then he sits upon the ground,
Munching slowly at his bread,
Counts the bright stars overhead.
Suddenly, a neigh resounded —
To his feet our sentry bounded;
Peering round with shaded eyes,
In the field a mare he spies.
Now, this mare, I'd have you know,
Whiter was than whitest snow,
Silken mane in ringlets streaming
To the ground, all golden gleaming.
“Oh, ho ho — so this is it!
You're the rogue — but wait a bit!
I don't like such nasty jokes
Played on honest farming folks!
Trifling never was my line
And I'll jump upon your spine,
Nasty little plague,” said he
And, approaching stealthily,
Seized her tail as in a vice,
Mounted on her in a trice,
Landed on her with a smack,
Back to front and front to back.
But the mare, whose blood was hot,
Started bucking on the spot.



Eyes ablaze with angry glow,
Like an arrow from its bow
Over hills and valleys sped,
Over streams and gullies fled,
On her haunches rearing, prancing,
'Neath the forest branches dancing,
All her wiles and strength in vain
Plying, to be free again.
But—she found her match at last—
To her tail Ivan stuck fast.

Finally, she said to him,
Spent, and trembling in each limb:
“Since you sat me, I confess
I am yours now to possess;
Find a place for me to rest,
Care for me as you know best,
But—remember this my warning:
That for three days, every morning,
You must let me out to graze.
At the end of these three days,
Two such handsome steeds I'll bear
As have ne'er been seen, I swear;
And a third I promise you,
Only twelve hands high, with two
Little humps upon his back;
Ears—a yard long; eyes—coal-black.
If you wish, why, sell the two,
But, Ivan, whate'er you do,
Part not with the little steed,
Though you be in direst need,
Nor for gold, nor silken raiment,
Nor for lucky charm in payment.
Faithful friend to you he'll be,
Where you go, on land or sea;
He'll find shade from summer's heat,



Keep you warm in snow and sleet,
Find your food in time of need,
Quench your thirst with cooling mead.
Afterwards, you'll set me free,
Let me roam at liberty."

Now, Ivan thought this all right,
Found her shelter for the night
In an empty shepherd's shack;
O'er its door he hung a sack;
Then he homeward made his way
With the early light of day,
Singing merrily: "Heigh-ho,
Vanya would a-wooing go."

See him near his home once more,
Knocking at the cottage door,
Calling out with might and main,
Till the rafters rang again.
You'd have sworn, to hear him shout,

That a fire had broken out.
Up his brothers from their beds
Jumped in fright, and scratched their heads,
Stammering: "Who knocks so loud?"
"Me, the Fool," came answer proud.
So they opened up the door,
Let him in, and roundly swore
At Ivan—how did he dare
Give his brothers such a scare?
But Ivan, with heedless air,
Climbed up on the oven, where,
Lying down in all his clothes,
He related, at repose,
His adventures—while, amazed,
Open-mouthed, his hearers gazed.
"Well, I didn't sleep all night,
Counting all the stars so bright.
Possibly, the moon was there,
Though I really wouldn't swear—
Satan suddenly appeared,
Bristling whiskers, bushy beard,
Cat-like face and saucer eyes;
I stared on in stark surprise
As that devil, with his tail,
Whipped the wheat as with a flail.
You know, joking's not my line—
So I jumped right on his spine.
He led me a dance, look you—
Nearly broke my head in two.
But I'm not a fool—not quite—
Like a vice, I held him tight.
How that cunning rascal tried!
Finally, he begged and cried:
'Spare my life this once, please do!
For twelve months, I promise you
Not to break a single law,

Christian folks to plague no more.’
I believed him on the spot—
Off the devil’s back I got.”
And Ivan then said no more—
Yawned and soon began to snore,
While his brothers, though they tried
Not to, laughed until they cried,
Laughing at that booby’s joke—
You’d have thought that they would choke!
Father, too, could not refrain—
Laughed, and cried, and laughed again,
Though it is a sin, they say,
For old men to laugh that way.

Since that night, I cannot say
How much time had passed away—
For of this I heard no word
Nor from man, nor beast, nor bird.
What is this to you or me
Whether one year passed, or three?
Time can’t be recalled, once fled—
Let me tell my tale instead.

Well, Danilo (I should say—
This was on a holiday),
Tipsy, reeled along the track
Leading to that shepherd’s shack.
There he saw a handsome pair—
Steeds, with manes of golden hair,
And beside them, in its stall,
Stood a horse, so queer and small,
Two humps on his little back;
Ears a yard long; eyes—coal-black.
All the fumes immediately
Left Danilo’s head, and he
Murmured: “Hm! At last it’s clear

Why that fool is sleeping here!"
Breathless bursting home, Danilo
Cried excitedly: "Gavrilo,
Come and see what lovely pair
Our young fool has hidden there—
Steeds, with manes of golden hair—
No one saw their likes, I swear."
Fast as legs could carry, Dan,
Barefoot, with Gavrilo ran,
Through the fields, as though on wings,
Heedless of the nettle stings.

Thrice they fell, and thrice they rose,
Bruised their eyes and tore their clothes
Ere they reached the shepherd's shack,
Rubbing one another's back.
Here, two chargers met their gaze—
Snorting, ruby eyes ablaze,
Silken tails in ringlets streaming,
Golden in the shadows gleaming;
And their hoofs, of diamonds made,
Were with monster pearls inlaid.
Yes, it cannot be denied—
Horses fit for tsars to ride.
And they nearly burst from spleen
As they stared upon this scene;
Th'eldest, gaping, scratched his head—
"Where'd he get them from?" he said.
"This just proves the ancient rule—
Fortune favours but the fool.
Though *you'd* rack your brains, *you'd* never
Raise a ruble, though you're clever.
Say, Gavrilo—let's go down,
Sunday, to the fair in town,
Sell them to the Boyards there;
We will share the takings square—



And, with money, you'll agree
We can have a merry spree,
Once we set our pockets jingling.
While not e'en the slightest inkling
Of his horses' whereabouts
Will he have, that foolish lout.
Let him seek them high and low —
Strike the bargain, brother — so!"
Said and done — and here, each brother
Crossed himself and kissed the other;
They went home in glee together
Chatting, in the highest feather,
Of the steeds, their future feast,
And that little wonder beast.

Slowly, Time crept on its way,
Hour by hour and day by day;
Sunday came and found them dressed
For the town, in all their best;
There they meant to sell their ware,
Find out, at the harbour there,
What strange ships had put to port,
And what linens merchants sought;
Had Saltán his flag unfurled
To enslave the Christian world?
See them at their icons praying,
Then, for Father's blessing staying,
After which, in secret, they
Took the steeds and stole away.

Night her shadows softly spread,
And Ivan set out for bed.
Through the village he went, swinging,
Munching at his crust, and singing;
Through the meadow now he skips,
With his hands upon his hips;



In the shack, upon his toes,
Like a very lord, he goes.
Everything was in its place—
But the steeds—of them no trace!
Only tiny humpback, neighing,
Fawned around his feet, a-playing,
Flapping both ears left and right,
Prancing gaily in delight.
At this sight, Ivan wept sore,
As he leaned against the door.
“Oh, my horses black as night,
With your golden manes so bright!
Did not I look after you?
What foul devil stole you? Who?
Plague on him, the dirty dog!

May he perish in a bog!
When he to the next world goes,
May he trip and break his nose!
Oh, my horses black as night,
With your golden manes so bright!”

Humpback neighed and shook his head.
“Do not fret, Ivan,” he said.
“Yes, your loss is great, I know —
But I’ll help you in your woe.
Blame the devil for his deeds —
Your two brothers stole those steeds.
Dry your tears, Ivan — make haste —
We have not much time to waste.
Mount my back — when I say: ‘Go’,
Hold to me for all you know.
Though I’m small — that’s true, of course,
I’m as good as any horse.
Once I get into my pace
Any demon I’ll outrace.”

Saying this, he stretched out flat,
On his back Ivan then sat,
Grabbed his ears and held them tight,
Shouting out with all his might;
Little humpback’s sinews quivered,
He stood on his feet and shivered,
Shook his mane and, with a neigh,
Like an arrow sped away.
Only dust clouds marked the course
Of the rider and the horse.
On they flew, as quick as thought —
In a trice, the thieves were caught.

Seeing him, his brothers stared,
Scratched their heads, confused and scared;



Wrathfully, Ivan exclaimed:
“Brothers, are you not ashamed!
Though you’re clev’rer than Ivan,
Still, Ivan’s an honest man.
I did not rob you — not I!”
Th’eldest, squirming, made reply:
“We are both to blame, I fear,
But, dear brother — listen here —
And, consider if you please
That we lead no life of ease;
Though we sow a lot of wheat,
We can hardly make ends meet.
Quit-rent’s always overdue,
The police, they fleece us too.
So, Gavriilo, here, and I
All last night ne’er closed an eye
Talking of our sorry plight
And of how to put things right.
So, to meet our many needs,
We resolved to sell your steeds
For a thousand at the fair —
Not a ruble less, I swear.
And, in gratitude to you,
Bring you back a gift or two —
High-heeled boots of finest leather,
And a cap, with bells and feather.
Then — the old man’s frail and ailing —
He can work no more — he’s failing,
Yet must dodder out his span —
Come, you’re not a fool, Ivan.”
“If that’s so,” Ivan said, “well,
I suppose you’d better sell
My two golden-crested horses —
Take me with you — let’s join forces.”
If thoughts could, their thoughts would kill —
But, perforce, they feigned goodwill.

Soon the sky grew overcast,
Colder, colder blew the blast,
So they called a bivouac
So as not to lose the track,
In a wood; the steeds were made
Fast beneath its leafy shade;
There they made themselves at ease,
Ate and drank beneath the trees,
After which, in happy mood,
Each made merry as he could.

Soon, Danilo saw a light
In the darkness of the night;
Nudged Gavril on the sly,
Cunningly, he winked an eye,
Pointed where the light was burning,
Coughed a muffled cough of warning,
After which he scratched his head.
“My—how dark it is,” he said.
“If the moon would show her face
Even for a little space,
How much better it would be—
Why, the blindest owl can see
More than us—but stay—look there—
Can you see it? I declare
Something’s burning—yes, a fire!
Just the thing that we require!
Listen, now, Vanyusha dear,
Go and fetch some embers here—
For it really slipped my mind,
And I left my flint behind.”
To himself says brother Dan:
“May you break your neck, young man!”
Says Gavril, “Do I care?
Lord knows what is burning there.

If a highwayman besets him,
We for ever can forget him.”

So our fool, who knew no care,
Climbed upon his horse right there,
Twined its mane around his wrist,
Urged it on with heel and fist,
Shouting out with all his might.
Up his horse rose out of sight.
Then Gavriilo cried in fright:
“Saints be with us all this night!
Save us, Lord, from evil sin —
Say — what devil’s under him?”

Brighter, brighter shone the light,
Swifter, swifter was their flight
Till they halted where it lay —
There, the field was bright as day,
Lit by wondrous brilliant rays —
Cold and smokeless in their blaze!
Here, Ivan in stark surprise,
Stared and said: “Why, bless my eyes!
Look — there’s light in plenty there —
But no smoke or heat — I swear
Now, this *is* a curious light.”

Quoth his horse: “Yes, you’re quite right.
And you very well may stare!
That’s a Fire-Bird’s feather there!
But, Ivan, for your own sake,
Touch it not, for in its wake
Many sorrows, many woes
Follow everywhere it goes.”
Growled our fool: “You’re telling me —
Woes and sorrows — we shall see!”
So he wrapped it up with care



In a rag to hide the glare,
Hid it in his hat, and then
Galloped swiftly back again;
Tied his horse fast to a tree,
To his brothers then said he:
“When I got there, all I found,
Was a burnt stump on the ground;
I blew hard to raise a spark,
Nearly burst there in the dark.
And I puffed and puffed—in vain,
For it wouldn’t burn again!”
Both his brothers laughed all night
At Ivan, in sheer delight.
He, however, merely crept

'Neath the wain and snoring, slept
Till the dawning of the day,
When to town they drove away,
Halting at the Hostlers' Fair,
Opposite the Palace there.

Now, there was an old tradition
That, without the Mayor's permission,
Nothing could be bought or sold,
Nor for barter, nor for gold.
As the church-bells called for prayer,
On his palfrey rode the Mayor;
Spurred and belted, furs on shoulders,
Guarded by a hundred soldiers.
Near him, bearded and sedate,
Rode a crier in full state,
Golden trumpet gaily sounding,
Voice stentorian resounding:
"Oyez, honest merchants there,
Open up and sell your ware!
And you watchmen — stay you near,
Guard their stalls — keep eye and ear
Sharp, maintaining strictest order,
Keep from riots and disorder;
See no rogue, however sly,
Fools good folk with honeyed lie."
Then the merchants loudly call,
As each opens up his stall:
"Honest masters — come this way!
See what wares we have today!
Oh, come buy! Come buy! Come buy!
Our goods always satisfy!"
Buyers flock like flies round honey,
Choose their goods and pay their money;
As the coins change hands and chink,
Merchants to the watchmen wink.



Meanwhile, with his guards, the Mayor
Halted at the Hostlers' Fair,
Where he saw a crowd so great,
That it blocked up every gate,
Surging like a stormy sea,
Shouting, laughing lustily.
Here, the Mayor, who wished to see
What aroused such jollity,
Gave his troops an order to
Clear the way and let him through.
"Hey, you ragamuffins there—
Make way! Make way for the Mayor!"
Shouted his bewhiskered soldiers,
Cracking whips on backs and shoulders.

Doffing hats, the crowd in pain,
Stepped aside and made a lane.

Then the Mayor rode in the Fair,
Saw two chargers standing there—
Handsome horses, black as night,
Silken manes in ringlets bright,
Golden in the sunlight streaming,
Flowing tails, all golden gleaming.
Here the old man stroked his beard
And his anger disappeared.
“Wondrous is God’s world,” quoth he.
“Countless are its marvels—see!”
And his guards bowed to the ground
Dumbstruck by his speech profound.
Then the Mayor gave out strict orders
’Gainst all tumults and disorders,
That those steeds, on no condition,
Might be sold without permission;
Set a guard, and off to Court
Raced to hand in his report.

Straightway to the Tsar went he.
“Pardon, Gracious Majesty!”
Cried the Mayor, as he fell prone
Breathlessly before the throne.
“Be not angry with your slave—
Suffer me to speak, I crave.”
“Speak,” vouchsafed the Tsar. “Commence,
But be sure your words make sense.”
“I shall try, Your Majesty,
I am Lord Mayor here, you see,
I would give my life for you...”
“Yes—we know—we know ’tis true.”
“Sire, I rode to Hostlers’ Fair
With my guard today, and there



I beheld a crowd, so great,
That it blocked up every gate;
So I told my men that they
Break the crowd and clear the way —
Which they did, Your Majesty.
In I rode — what did I see
When I got inside the Fair?
I saw two such chargers there —
Handsome horses, black as night,
Silken manes in ringlets bright,
Golden in the sunlight streaming,
Flowing tails, all golden gleaming,
And their hoofs, of diamonds made,
Were with monster pearls inlaid.”

Cried the Tsar excitedly:
“We shall have to go and see —
And, if they are all you say,
We shall buy those two today.
Ho! My coach!” — he clapped his hands —
Lo! — his coach all ready stands —
Donned his robes and crown with care
And in haste drove to the fair,
Followed by his Guard of State.

When he stopped outside the gate,
All the people straightaway
Kneeled and wildly cheered: “Hurray!”
In reply, the Tsar smiled brightly,
Bowed, and from his coach sprang lightly...
Charmed by those two steeds, the Tsar
Gazed at them from near and far,
Praised and praised them once again,
Softly stroked each golden mane,
Gently patted each steed’s spine,
Felt their necks, so sleek and fine.



After he had gazed his fill,
He turned round with right goodwill,
Saying: "My good people, who
Owns these handsome chargers two?
Who's the master?" Here, Ivan,
Arms akimbo, like a *Pan*,*
Pushed his brothers both aside,
Puffed his cheeks and proudly cried:
"Tsar, these steeds belong to me,
I'm their owner, too, you see."

* *Pan*—Gentleman. — *Tr.*

“Will you sell them to me, say?”
“No, I’m swapping them today.”
“What will you be taking, then?”
“Twice five caps—and that makes ten,
Full of silver—that’s my price!”
So the coins were in a trice
Counted out—the Tsar, in pleasure,
Gave five rubles for good measure—
Generous a tsar was he!

Ten grey grooms in livery,
Trimmed with gold and silver slashes,
Each with gaily coloured sashes,
Each with saffian whip in hand,
Took the horses’ bridles, and
Led them to the Royal Palace.
But the steeds, in play, or malice,
Tripped their grooms and straightway ran,
Bridles broken, to Ivan.

Back the Tsar drove to Ivan,
Said to him: “Look here, my man,
Now, my grooms can’t hold those two—
So, there’s nothing else to do,
But to come along with me.
I shall issue a decree,
Make you Master of my Horse,
Like a lord, you’ll live, of course;
You’ll have raiment of the best,
Gold brocade upon your chest;
On my royal word—you’ll see!
Are you willing?” “Well, I’ll be...
In the Palace I shall live!
And to me, the Tsar will give
Handsome raiment of the best,
Gold brocade upon my chest!

Like a lord, I'll live in clover,
Rule the Royal Stables over!
I, a ploughboy, now will be
Voivode to His Majesty!
Well, I never! Your commission,
I accept, Tsar, on condition —
That you never treat me rough,
Always let me sleep enough —
Or you'll see no more of me!"

Whistling to his horses, he
Sauntered through the city, singing,
Carelessly his mittens swinging,
Followed by his steeds a-prancing
And his humpbacked horse a-dancing
To the rhythm of his song,
And the marvel of the throng.

As for his two brothers, they
Stowed the silver safe away
In their belts; then, in high feather,
Had a drink or two together
And rode home in glee; once there,
Shared the money fair and square;
Married, 'mid much joy and laughter,
Lived and prospered ever after.
And the rest of all their days
Spoke of their Ivan with praise.

Let us now forget those two
And, good people, Christians true,
I'll amuse you if I can
With the deeds of our Ivan.
How he ruled the stables over,
Living like a lord in clover,
And was taken for a sprite;

How he lost his feather bright;
How he laid the Fire-Bird's snare;
How he stole the Tsar-Maid Fair;
How he found her ring for her,
How he was her messenger;
How the Sun, at his request,
Gave the Monster Whale his rest;
One more deed, but not the least,
How he thirty ships released;
How, when boiled in cauldrons, he
Came out handsome as could be.
In a word, how our young man
Ended up as Tsar Ivan.





PART TWO

*Tales, you know, are quickly spun,
Deeds are sooner said than done.*

Once again my tale proceeds
Of Ivan and of his deeds,
Of the tiny fallow bay,
Talking horse, so wise and gay.
Goats are grazing on the seas,
Hills are overgrown with trees;
Golden bridle, loosely swinging,
See the stallion sunward winging—
Far below him, forests glide;
Thunder-clouds, on every side,
Race across the sky and dash,

Hurling lightning as they crash.
Wait — this is the prelude to
What I shall be telling you.
Have you heard of Buyan Island
Floating on the ocean wild, and
Of the maiden wondrous fair
Sleeping in a casket there?
Forest beasts with gentle tread
Guard her grave, while overhead
Nightingales their music pour.
Wait, my friends, a little more —
Now my prelude's said and done,
And my story is begun.

Well, good friends and Christians true,
Fellow-countrymen — look you —
Our young fellow made his way
To the Palace that fine day.
He is Master of the Horse
And he doesn't pine, of course,
For his brothers and his dad.
And, indeed, why should our lad,
Living in the Royal Court,
Waste on them a single thought?
He has garments gay in plenty
And possesses five and twenty
Chests, all full of caps and shoes
Out of which to pick and choose.
All he does is eat his fill,
Slake his thirst, and sleep at will.

Now, the chamberlain began,
As weeks passed, to watch Ivan...
You should know, that he had been
(Till Ivan came on the scene)
Master of the Royal Horse —

His was noble blood, of course—
So, no wonder that he bore
Malice towards Ivan, and swore
That he'd die, but soon or late
Drive the upstart from the gate.
But the rogue, his good time biding
And his double-dealing hiding,
Feigned to be Ivan's best friend,
Masked his feelings to this end,
Thinking, "Wait, you dirty lout,
Time will come, I'll turn you out."

So, the chamberlain began,
As weeks passed, to watch Ivan;
And he noticed that he never
Fed or groomed those steeds, or ever
Took them out for exercise;
Yet those steeds, to his surprise,
Always were, whene'er paraded,
Brushed and burnished, manes a-braided.
Tails, in flowing ringlets streaming,
Glossy coats, like satin gleaming,
Mangers—always full of wheat
Which, it seemed, grew at their feet.
And huge tubs, he could have sworn,
Were fresh-filled with mead each morn.
"Now, whatever can this mean?"
Sighed the chamberlain in spleen—
"Can it be, a goblin sprite
Comes and plays his pranks at night?
Watch him—that's what I shall do.
And it should be easy to
Spin a story in a flash
And to settle that fool's hash.
I shall tell the Tsar, of course,
That the Master of the Horse

Is a wicked infidel,
And a sorcerer as well;
That Old Nick his soul has taken,
That he has God's Church forsaken,
Bows before the Cross of Rome,
During Lent eats meat at home."

So, the former Chief of Horse
(Yes, the chamberlain, of course)
That same evening hid away
In a stall, beneath some hay.

Blackest midnight came at last,
Pit-a-pat, his heart beat fast;
Lying there, with bated breath,
He peeped out, as still as death,
Waiting for that sprite—when hark!
Loud the door creaked in the dark,
And the horses pawed the ground
As the sprite, without a sound,
Entered—though he looked, of course,
Like the Master of the Horse;
First he barred the door; then he
Took his hat off carefully,
And from it he slowly took
Out his kerchief, which he shook
Till the Fire-Bird's feather blazed;
While the chamberlain, amazed,
Nearly screamed there in the hay,
Almost gave himself away.
Unsuspectingly, the sprite
In a corn-bin placed the light,
After which, with tender care,
He commenced to groom the pair;
Braided their fine manes so long,
While he sang a merry song.



Meanwhile, crouching there and quivering,
Hair all bristling, skin a-shivering,
Stared the chamberlain in fright
At the joker of the night.
He could not believe his eyes—
Sure the sprite was in disguise!
It nor horns, nor whiskers wore—
'Twas a handsome lad he saw!
Hair with ribbons gaily dressed,
Gold brocade upon his chest;
Saffian boots right to his knees—
This was Vanya, if you please!
Now, what could this mean? Our spy
Stared again and rubbed his eye
And he growled out finally:
“Oh, so that is it! I see!
Very well! I'll tell the Tsar
What a smart young man you are!
Just you wait until tomorrow—
You'll remember me with sorrow!”
But Ivan, quite unaware
Of the evil lurking there,
Gaily sings his little song,
As he braids those manes so long.
After he had groomed each steed,
Filled each tub with cooling mead,
And the bins with choicest corn,
He let out a sleepy yawn,
Wrapped the feather up once more,
Laid himself upon the floor;
By his horses made his bed
With his hat beneath his head.

With the dawn, the chamberlain
Stretched his limbs to ease the strain
And, on hearing our Ivan

Snoring loud as Yeruslan,*
Rose, and on his tip-toes crept
Cautiously to where he slept,
Snatched the feather from his hat,
Then he vanished—just like that!

As the Tsar woke with a snore,
There he stood, right at the door;
Bowing low, until his head
Hit the floor, he whined and said:
“To confess, O Majesty,
I have dared to come to thee!
Be not angry with thy slave—
Suffer me to speak, I crave.”
“Speak, without exaggeration
And without prevarication,”
Yawned the Tsar. “If you tell fibs,
Know, the knout will count your ribs.”
Gathering his courage, he
Said: “God bless Your Majesty!
On the Holy Cross, forsooth,
I am telling you the truth.
All the Court knows it is true—
That Ivan conceals from you
That which can’t be bought or sold
Nor for silver, nor for gold—
It’s a Fire-Bird’s feather, see,
Which he hides, Your Majesty.”
“What! A Fire-Bird’s! And he dare,
Cursed varlet, such a rare...
Oh the villain—wait and see
What a whipping there will be!”
“That’s not all,” the chamberlain
Whispered, as he bowed again.

* *Yeruslan*—a valiant Knight, endowed with fabulous strength, and hero of Russian folklore.— *Tr.*

“Were it but the feather, he
Might retain it, Majesty—
But, he boasts, as I have heard,
That, did you but say the word,
He could bring the Bird of Fire
To your Royal Chamber, Sire.”
And the spy, with servile tread,
On all fours approached the bed,
Dropped the treasure—and once more
Banged his head upon the floor.

Long the Tsar, enchanted, gazed,
Chortled, stroked his beard, amazed;
Bit the feather’s tip, then he
Placed it under lock and key,
Shouted in impatience and,
As confirming his command,
Waved his sceptre in the air:
“Hey! You! Fetch me that fool there!”

All the lords-in-waiting ran
Instantly to fetch Ivan;
But, colliding near the door,
Fell and sprawled upon the floor,
While the Tsar in huge delight
Roared with laughter at the sight;
So his lords, all quick to see
What so pleased His Majesty,
Winks exchanged as they once more
Threw themselves upon the floor.
Whereupon, amused thereat,
He gave each a brand-new hat,
After which they once more ran
Hurrying, to fetch Ivan;
And without an accident
This time, on their mission went.



When they reached the stables, they
Rushed inside without delay,
Fell upon our poor fool there,
Kicked him, punched him, pulled his hair,
Fully half an hour, or more—
All Ivan did, was to snore,
Finally, a stable groom
Woke him with a stable broom.

Jumping up, Ivan bawled out:
“Varlets — what are you about?
I shall teach you not to worry
Me, you villains, in a hurry,
When I’m sleeping in my bed.”
But the lords-in-waiting said:
“Up! The Tsar sent us to say
That you come without delay!”
“Oh, the Tsar? Ah, well, then, wait —
I will dress and go there straight,”
Yawning answered our Ivan.
So he put on his kaftan,
Tied his girdle in its place,
Combed his hair and washed his face;
And strode forth in pompous pride,
Horse whip dangling by his side.

When he reached His Majesty,
Our Ivan bowed low, then he
Hummed and hawed and puffed his chest,
Said: “Why did you spoil my rest?”
Here, the Tsar jumped up in bed,
Left eye squinting, seeing red.
“Silence!” wrathfully roared he —
“It is you must answer me!
By what law and what decree
Have you from Our Majesty
Hidden what is ours by right?
Yes — the Fire-Bird’s feather bright?
Am I not your lawful Tsar?
Answer, heathen that you are!”
But Ivan made answer bold —
Waved his hand and shouted: “Hold!
When did I give you my hat?
How could you discover that?
What — have you got second sight?

You can lock me up, all right,
You can have me beaten flat—
I've no feather, and that's that!"
"You'll be flogged! Now answer me!"
"But I'm speaking plainly—see,
I've no feather—and, how, pray,
Could such wonders come my way?"
Here the Tsar sprang to the floor,
Shook the feather with a roar—
"What is this? Now will you dare
Stand and contradict me there?"
Here Ivan gave just one look,
Like a storm-tossed leaf he shook,
Dropped his hat in sheer dismay.
"Ah, you don't know what to say,"
Said the Tsar. "But wait, my man..."
"Mercy, mercy," cried Ivan,
Groveling upon the floor,
At the Tsar's feet, sobbing sore—
"Pardon me this once, please do
And I'll lie no more to you."
"You'll be pardoned for the nonce,
Seeing you have sinned but once,"
Said the Tsar. "But bear in mind
I'll not always be so kind.
Gracious, when I'm angry—why,
I make hairs and heads to fly!
That's what I am like, my man,
So, let's not waste words, Ivan.
You have boasted, as I've heard,
That, did I but say the word,
You could bring the Bird of Fire
To the Chamber of your Sire.
Now, do not say 'No' to me—
Do your best and bring one, see?"
Up Ivan bounced like a ball:

“Nothing of the sort at all,”
Shouted he, and wiped his eye;
“I that feather don’t deny —
But the talk about the bird
Is as false as it’s absurd.”
Wrathfully, the Tsar’s beard shook:
“What — me argue with you? Look!
If you do not bring to me
That Fire-Bird, in sennights three,
To my Royal Chamber, now,
By my Royal Beard I vow,
Hide yourself where e’er you please —
Under ground, or under seas —
I’ll have you impaled, my man!
Off, you scum!” In tears, Ivan
To the hayloft made his way
Where his little humpback lay.

Hearing him, his humpback ran
Full of glee to meet Ivan;
But on seeing him in tears,
Almost sobbed, and drooped his ears.
“Why, Ivanushka, so sad?
Tell me what’s the matter, lad,”
Said he, fawning round his knees.
“Put your mind, Ivan, at ease,
Tell me what has happened, please —
Just confide in me, Ivan,
I will help you if I can.
Are you ill? If not, then who
Has upset you? Tell me, do.”
And Ivan, in bitter tears,
As he kissed his humpback’s ears,
Said: “The Tsar — Oh, have you heard?
Bids me bring a Fire-Bird!
Oh, whatever shall I do?”



In reply, his horse said: "True,
Your misfortune's great, I know.
But I'll help you in your woe.
You rejected my advice—
Now, you have to pay the price;
For remember, when you found,
That bird's feather on the ground,
I told you, for your own sake,
Not to touch it; in its wake
Many sorrows, many woes
Follow everywhere it goes.
Now, Ivan, you see that I,
When I warned you, told no lie.
But, Ivan, 'twixt you and me—
This is easy as can be;
Service lies ahead, my man.
Now, go to the Tsar, Ivan,

Say to him in language plain:
‘Tsar, I need the best of grain,
And two troughs; then, if you please,
Wine—brought in from overseas;
Tell them that they must make haste,
For I have no time to waste—
I’ll be off at dawn of day.’”

So Ivan went straightaway,
Told the Tsar in language plain:
“Tsar, I need the best of grain,
And two troughs; then, if you please,
Wine—brought in from overseas;
Tell them, too, they must make haste—
For I have no time to waste—
With the early dawn of day
I’ll be going on my way.”

So the Tsar gave strict commands
To fulfil Ivan’s demands;
Called Ivan a brave young man,
Said: “God speed you” to Ivan.

Dawn had scarce begun to peep,
Humpback roused Ivan from sleep:
“Hey, my lad—stop snoring, do,
Up! Your duty’s calling you!”
So Ivan got up and dressed
Warmly for his royal quest;
Took the grain and took the wine,
Tightly tied the troughs with twine,
Put it all into a sack,
Climbed upon his horse’s back,
Chewing on a piece of bread,
To the rising sun he sped,
Off to seek that Fire-Bird.



Seven days they rode, I heard;
When the eighth day dawned, they stood
In a dark and dense green wood.
Here the humpback tossed his head:
“You will see a glade,” he said;
“In the middle of this glade
Stands a hill, of silver made.
There it is that every morn
Fire-Birds flock before the dawn,
Water from the stream to drink.
We will catch them there, I think.”
With these words, he swiftly ran
To the glade, with our Ivan.
What a meadow met their sight—
Blades of grass, like emeralds bright!
And the breezes, as they blew,
Scattered sparkles through the dew;
Flowers sweet of beauty rare
Blossomed in the meadow there.
In the middle of this glade
Rose a hill, of silver made,
Like an airy tower bright,
With its summit hid from sight.
And the sun, with gentle blaze,
Gilds it with its summer rays
Till the peak in splendour bright
Flashes like a beacon light.

Up the hill the humpback flew,
And he climbed a mile or two—
Then he stopped and tossed his head,
Flapping both his ears, and said:
“Look—it’s getting dark, Ivan,
You must watch as best you can;
Mix some wine and grain—enough,
But not more, to fill one trough;

And to hide yourself from sight,
'Neath the other trough sit tight,
Make no sound, and mind you keep
Eyes and ears alert—don't sleep—
You will see, at dawn of day,
Flocks of Fire-Birds come this way.
They will peck your grain, and chatter
In their language—but no matter—
Seize the nearest one, Ivan,
Hold it fast as fast you can;
When you have that Fire-Bird tight,
Shout for me with all your might;
I shall come without delay.”
“Won't they burn my fingers, say?”
To his horse exclaimed Ivan
As he spread out his kaftan.
“Mittens I shall have to wear,
They might be too hot to bear.”
Here, from sight his humpback swept;
With a grunt, Ivan then crept
Underneath a trough, where he
Lay as still as still could be.

Suddenly, at dead of night,
All the hill-side blazed with light,
And it seemed as though 'twere day—
'Twas a flock of Fire-Birds—they
Swooped upon the wine-soaked wheat,
Screamed and hopped on drunken feet.
While Ivan, from them well hidden
In his trough, as he was bidden,
Gazed on them in wonder and,
Waving wildly with his hand,
Murmured: “Goodness gracious me!
What strange creatures do I see!
Now, if I could catch them all,

It would make a lovely haul!
Quite a half a hundred there!
They are beauties, I declare!
Feet all red, upon my word!
But their tails—they're just absurd!
Surely chickens never had
Tails like that, Ivan my lad!
Then again—this blinding light!
Father's stove is not so bright!"

Our Ivan his long speech ended
And his heavy trough up-ended,
Grunting softly from the strain,
Crawled until he reached the grain.
Then the nearest bird he seized
By its shining tail—and sneezed;
"Oh, my little humpback dear,
Hurry fast—come, do you hear!
I have caught a Fire-Bird—see,"
Roared our fool most lustily.
Lo, the humpback stood beside him,
Saying: "Good—now quickly hide him
In your sack, and hold on tight,
For we haven't got all night."
But Ivan the Fool said: "Oh,
Let me scare them ere we go.
Look—they've had so much to eat
That they can't stand on their feet!"
Said Ivan, and then and there
With his sack he beat the air.
In a blinding blaze of light
Started up the flock in fright,
Wheeling in a ring of fire,
Soaring to the clouds, and higher.
While Ivan, with crazy laughter,
Waved his mittens, running after,
Yelling madly, just as though



He had swallowed soap, you know.
When the birds had gone from view,
Our Ivan, without ado,
Made the royal treasure fast
And set off for home at last.

Finally, they reached the Court,
And the Tsar cried: "Have you brought
Me the Fire-Bird?" — while he eyed
His attendant by his side,
Who (the chamberlain, I mean)
Stood and bit his nails in spleen.
"Yes, of course," replied Ivan.
"Then, where is it, my young man?"
"Wait a minute, and you'll see!
Bid them first, Your Majesty,
Shut the chamber casement tight,
Draw the shades, keep out the light."
All the lords-in-waiting ran,
Closed the casement for Ivan.
Flinging down his sack with pride,
"Ups-a-daisy, dear," he cried.
Blinded by the flood of light,
They all screened their eyes in fright,
And the Tsar, in accents dire,
Shouted: "Gracious! We're on fire!
Water—call the fire brigade!
What a fire this fool has made!"
Tears a-streaming from his eyes,
Our bird-catcher, laughing, cries:
"No, no — this is not a fire —
It is but your Fire-Bird, Sire.
It's a lovely plaything, see,
That I've brought Your Majesty!"
Said the Tsar for all to hear:
"Vanya, friend, I love you, dear,



And, in token of my joy,
Be my Royal Groom, my boy!”

Then the former Chief of Horse —
(Yes, the chamberlain, of course)
Muttered to himself in hate:
“No, you ill-bred milksop — wait!
You won’t always prosper so,
Have such foolish luck — oh no!
I’ll get you in trouble, yet!
Yes, I will, my little pet!”

Now, one evening, three weeks after,
Loud the kitchen rang with laughter,
Palace cooks and servants sat
Round the table for a chat,
Passing round the golden mead,
While one “Yeruslan” did read.
“You should see,” another said,
“What a lovely book I read —
I just borrowed it today —
Why, it takes your breath away!
Actually, it’s pretty small —
Only has five tales in all,
But I’m sure that you have never
Heard of tales so strange and clever.”
In one voice, they cried aloud:
“Tell us, brother, don’t be proud.”
“Well then, make your choice,” said he.
“There are five — so let us see —
First, we have ‘The Beaver Beast’,
Then — ‘The Lady from the East’;
Next — God help me — here you are —
Yes, the third’s about a Tsar;
‘Prince Bobyl’ is number four,
Then, you know, there’s just one more,

Number five—the last of all...
Which I simply can't recall."
"Never mind, then." "Wait a minute—"
"Has it got a beauty in it?"
"So it has. The fifth, I swear,
Tells about the Tsar-Maid Fair.
So, my friends, just choose and say
Which one shall I read today?"
"Of the Tsar-Maid," they replied.
"We are tired of tsars," they cried.
So the servant, then and there,
Started with a solemn air:

"In a distant clime, my brothers,
Flows an ocean, like no others;
And it washes foreign shores,
And it's sailed by blackamoors;
From true Christian soil, however,
Noblemen, nor peasants, never
Sailed those pagan waters—though
Merchants who have sailed, and know,
Tell about a maiden fair
Living on that ocean there.
She's no common maiden, see—
Daughter to the moon is she,
And she's sister to the sun;
This fair maid, the stories run,
In a scarlet dress arrayed,
Sails a boat—of gold it's made;
And she wields a silver oar,
Steers that boat from shore to shore;
Gusli in her hand, she sings
As she plucks its silver strings."

At these words, the chamberlain
Bounded up, as if insane;

To the Royal Chamber sped,
Where he found the Tsar in bed;
Bowed his head, and with a bang
Hit the floor, and whining sang:
“To confess, O Majesty,
I have dared to come to thee!
Be not angry with thy slave —
Suffer me to speak, I crave!”
“Speak up,” was the Tsar’s reply,
“But be sure you do not lie.”
And the crafty chamberlain
Murmured, as he bowed again:
“We sat round the kitchen fire,
Drinking to your health, O Sire;
And we heard a story there —
Of the wondrous Tsar-Maid Fair.
And your groom got up and said,
Swearing by your Royal Head,
That he knew this birdie — yes —
So he called her, I confess;
And, O Sire, it’s also true
That he bragged to catch her, too.”
And the chamberlain once more
Banged his head upon the floor.
“Hey! My groom at once to me!”
Roared the Tsar impatiently.
Satisfied, the chamberlain
Raised himself erect again,
While the lords-in-waiting ran
Hastily to fetch Ivan.
In his nightshirt, straight from bed,
To the Tsar Ivan was led.

“Listen,” thus the Tsar began,
“I have been informed, Ivan,
That just now, my lad, you said,



Swearing by my Royal Head,
That, did I but say the word,
You could bring another bird
For your Monarch—you did swear
You could catch the Tsar-Maid Fair.”
“God save you from every harm,”
Cried the Tsar’s groom in alarm.
“Really, only in a dream
Could I say such things, I deem.
But no matter what you say
You will not fool me this way!”
Wrathfully, the Tsar’s beard shook:
“What—me argue with you? Look—
If you do not bring to me
That Tsar-Maid, in sennights three,
To my Royal Chamber—now,
By my Royal Beard, I vow—
Hide yourself where e’er you please,
Under ground, or under seas—
I’ll have you impaled, my man!
Off, you scum!” In tears, Ivan
To the hayloft made his way,
Where his little humpback lay.

“Why, Ivanushka, so sad?
What’s the matter now, my lad?”
Little humpbacked horse enquired;
“Are you ill? Or only tired?
What’s the trouble? Tell me who
Has upset you? Tell me, do.”
And Ivan, in bitter tears,
Kissed his little horse’s ears
Sobbing: “Oh, my humpback dear,
I must bring the Tsar-Maid here.
Oh, whatever shall I do?”
In reply, his horse said: “True,

Your misfortune's great, I know,
But I'll help you in your woe.
You rejected my advice—
Now, you have to pay the price;
But, Ivan, 'twixt you and me,
This is easy as can be.
Service lies ahead, my man;
Now, go to the Tsar, Ivan,
Say: 'To catch the Tsar-Maid, Sire,
Two large cloths I shall require,
And a tent of gold brocade,
And a dinner-service, made
All of gold, from overseas;
Sweetmeats, too, her taste to please.'"

So Ivan with fearless tread
Went back to the Tsar, and said:
"For the Tsar-Maid's capture, Sire,
Two large cloths I will require,
And a tent of gold brocade,
And a dinner-service, made
All of gold, from overseas;
Sweetmeats, too, her taste to please."
"Ah—at last you've found your head,"
Yawned the Tsar, and from his bed
Gave his lords most strict commands
To fulfil Ivan's demands.
Called Ivan a brave young man,
Said: "God speed to you, Ivan."

Dawn had scarce begun to peep,
Humpback roused Ivan from sleep:
"Hey, my lad, stop snoring, do!
Up! Your duty's calling you."
So Ivan got up and dressed
Warmly for his royal quest;

Took the tent of gold brocade,
Took the dinner-service, made
All of gold, from overseas,
Sweetmeats, too, her taste to please.
Took the cloths, and everything
Tied up tightly with a string,
Put it all into a sack,
Climbed upon his horse's back,
Chewing on a piece of bread,
To the rising sun he sped,
Off to seek the Tsar-Maid Fair.

Seven days they rode, I swear;
When the eighth day dawned, they stood
In a dark and dense green wood,
Here the humpback stopped, and said:
“See — the ocean lies ahead —
There it is, the whole year round,
This Tsar-Maiden can be found;
Only twice a year, not more,
Does she spend the day on shore;
And, tomorrow, I've a notion,
We shall see her on the ocean.”

Then he galloped fast once more
Till they reached the ocean shore;
In the distance, they could see
One white wave roll languidly.
Then Ivan dismounted. “Here,”
Said the humpback in his ear,
“Pitch your tent of gold brocade,
Lay the cloth, and service, made
All of gold, from overseas,
And the sweets her taste to please.
Hide behind the tent, and see
That you don't act foolishly.



Yonder—see, the boat is nearing,
With the Tsar-Maid in it, steering.
She'll walk in the tent—but you
Let her be, whate'er you do;
Let her walk inside the tent,
Eat and drink to heart's content.
When you hear her *Gusli* play,
Rush inside without delay,
Seize the Tsar-Maid—hold her tight,
Shout for me with all your might.
You won't need to call me twice—
I'll be with you in a trice,
And we'll go—but mind you keep
All your wits awake—don't sleep;
For if you but let her go,

You'll be in for lots of woe."
Then he flew off, like the wind,
Leaving our Ivan behind;
And Ivan, as he was told,
Hid behind the tent of gold,
There he pierced the gold brocade,
So that he could watch the Maid.

As the noonday sun shone clear,
To the shore the Maid drew near;
Gusli in her hand, she went
Straight inside the golden tent.
"Hm! So that's the Tsar-Maid Fair,"
Breathed the groom. "I do declare
All those tales were simply lies
When they praised her to the skies;
She is not the least bit pretty—
Pale and skinny, more's the pity;
And her chicken legs, so thin!
Why—it really is a sin!
Let who wills, take her to wife—
I would not, to save my life."
Here the Tsar-Maid plucked a string,
And so sweetly did she sing
That Ivan, quite unaware,
Drooped his sleepy head right there,
Closed his eyes in slumber deep,
Lulled by her sweet voice to sleep.

Slowly sank the sun from sight.
Suddenly, he woke in fright;
By him, furiously neighing,
Stood his horse and kicked him, saying:
"Sleep, my lad, sleep till tomorrow—
Sleep, and wake to grief and sorrow—
You will be impaled, not I!"

Here Ivan began to cry,
Sobbing on his horse's mane,
Saying: "I won't sleep again —
Pardon me this once, please do!"
"Well, the Lord will pardon you,"
Said his humpback in reply —
"Maybe all's not lost; we'll try
And perhaps we'll mend things yet —
But — no sleeping — don't forget!
For again, at break of day,
That Fair Maid will steer this way;
She will go into the tent,
On your honeyed mead intent;
Only — mind what I have said,
Otherwise, you'll lose your head."
Humpback disappeared once more,
And Ivan searched on the shore
For some flints and rusty nails
From the wrecks of stranded sails,
To arouse him, should once more
He, by chance, begin to snore.

It was early morning when
That Tsar-Maiden came again,
Beached her boat once more and sped,
By the fragrant odours led,
To the dainties which were laid
In the tent of gold brocade...
And again she plucked a string,
And so sweetly did she sing
That Ivanushka once more
Felt as sleepy as before.
"No, you nasty little cheat,"
Growled Ivan, upon his feet —
"This time you won't get away,
You will not fool me today."

And, unmoved by her sweet song,
Seized her by her tresses long...
“Help me, help me, Humpback dear,
Hurry to me, do you hear!”
In a flash, his horse stood there—
Saying: “Well done, I declare!
Mount me quickly, now, Ivan,
Hold her tight as tight you can.”

At the Palace gates, at last
They arrived; the Tsar ran fast
To the Fair Tsar-Maiden and
Led her by her lily hand
’Neath a silken canopy
To his royal throne; then he
Fondly gazing in her eyes
Said, with honeyed voice, and sighs:
“Peerless, beautiful princess—
Be my bride! Agree—say yes!
When I first saw you, desire
Burned within my breast like fire!
Oh! Your lovely eyes so bright—
They will haunt me day and night!
They will torture me by day
And at nights, drive sleep away!
Say but one sweet word to me
Everything is ready, see—
And tomorrow, oh my life,
We’ll be wedded man and wife,
And live happy as the May.”
She, however, turned away
From the Tsar, with scornful eye,
And refused to make reply.
But this only added fire
To his passionate desire—
Kneeling, he her fingers pressed,



Tenderly her hands caressed,
And repeated foolishly:
“Say but one sweet word to me!
Wherein have I grieved you, pray?
Is my love so hateful, say?”
“Lack-a-day, and woe is me,”
Said the Tsar-Maid mournfully —
“If you love me truly, bring
Me in three days’ time, my ring
Lying in the ocean bed —
Only then can we be wed.”
Eagerly the Tsar roared: “Hey!
Fetch Ivan at once, I say!”
And excited, almost ran
Off himself to fetch Ivan!

When Ivan appeared, the Tsar
Turned to him and murmured: “Ah!
Vanya — here’s a job for you —
Go down to the ocean blue;
From its bottom, you must bring
Me the Tsar-Maid’s signet-ring.
If you execute this task,
I will give you all you ask.”
“But I’ve only just got back,
And my joints are fit to crack;
Now you’ve found another quest!
Can’t I even have a rest?”
“Sirrah! Dare you tell me tarry?
Can’t you see I want to marry?”
Raged the Tsar, and with a roar
Stamped his foot upon the floor.
“No more arguments, I say —
Now, be off without delay!”
As Ivan turned round to go,
The Tsarevna called out: “Oh,

Listen — visit, on your way,
My green mansions, and convey
Greetings to my mother dear —
Say, her daughter — do you hear —
Asks, why she conceals her rays
These three nights and these three days;
Why my handsome brother shrouds
His bright face in gloomy clouds,
Never sending rays of love
From the misty heights above?
Don't forget my message, now.”
As Ivan made his last bow,
“I will not forget,” he said,
“If it doesn't slip my head;
But please tell me who's your brother?
Also, tell me who's your mother?
I don't know them, I confess.”
In reply, the fair princess
Said: “The Moon — she is my mother,
And the Sun — he is my brother.”
“See you're back in time, my man!”
Called the bridegroom to Ivan,
Who retired and made his way
To his humpback in the hay.

“Why, Ivanushka, so sad?
What's the matter now, my lad?”
Said his humpback with a neigh.
“Help me, little humpback, pray,
For the Tsar now wants to wed
That there skinny girl, he said.
And,” Ivan said to his horse,
“He must send me off, of course,
On a journey to the sea —
Only gave three days to me —
And some cursed signet-ring

From the sea bed I must bring!
For that skinny Tsar-Maid, I
Have to travel to the sky —
Give her compliments and love
To the Sun and Moon above.
And besides, there are a few
Questions I must ask them, too.”
Said his horse: “’Twixt you and me,
This is easy as can be;
Service, brother, lies ahead!
Now, you just go off to bed.
Early in the morning, we
Will be travelling to the sea.”

In the morning, fresh from rest,
Our Ivan, now warmly dressed,
Put three onions in his pack,
Climbed upon his horse’s back
And sped on his distant quest...
Brothers — let me have a rest!





PART THREE

*Till yesterday, Makar used to follow the plough.
But look at him today—he's a Voivode now!*

Ta-ra-ri-ra, ta-ra-rai,
All the horses ran away;
But the peasants, at long last,
Caught them all and bound them fast.
Master Raven, croak, croak, croak,
Blows his trumpet on an oak
And amuses Christians true,
Singing: "Now folks, listen, do—
Once a peasant and his wife
Led a very merry life.

He was always blithe and gay,
She was merry as the May;
When he danced and when she sang,
Then with mirth the village rang.”
This is but the prelude, friends,
And my tale starts when it ends.
Hark to what the house-fly’s singing
As upon our gates it’s swinging:
“What’s the price for news today?
News — fresh news — what will you pay?
Have you heard? The new-wed wife
Got the beating of her life
From her husband’s mother — who
Tied her to the oven, too;
Trussed her up, secure and neat,
Took her shoes from off her feet.
‘Leave the lads alone,’ she said,
‘And at nights just stay in bed.’”
Now my prelude’s said and done,
And my story is begun.

Well, Ivan rode off to bring
Back the Tsar-Maid’s signet-ring;
And his horse flew like the wind,
Leaving miles and leagues behind —
Twenty thousand leagues, ere night,
Covered in a single flight.

Near the sea, he loudly neighed
Saying: “We will reach a glade
In a minute, maybe more,
Leading to the ocean shore,
Where, with monster head and tail,
Lies the Monster-Marvel Whale.
These ten years he lies in pain,
Ignorant of how to gain



Pardon, to this very day.
He will humbly beg and pray
That you pardon for him gain
When we reach the Sun's domain.
Promise him, Ivan, and see
That you do so faithfully!"

When they reached the glade, they flew
Straight towards the ocean blue;
There, across it, lay the whale—
Monster head and monster tail;

He was all one mass of holes,
From his ribs grew stakes and poles;
On his tail—a forest black;
And a village on his back;
Peasants on his lip drove ploughs,
Children danced between his brows;
Oak-trees on his huge jaws grew,
Maidens there sought mushrooms, too.

Clatter, clatter, clatter, clack,
Rode the humpback o'er his back,
While the Monster-Marvel Whale
Eyed them as he swished his tail,
Opening his huge jaws wide
As most bitterly he sighed:
“May God speed you, gentles two—
Whither bound, and whence are you?”
“We're the Tsar-Maid's envoys, see—
From the capital are we,”
Little humpbacked horse replied—
“Eastward, to the Sun, we ride,
To his residence of gold.”
“Fathers, may I make so bold,”
Said the whale, “to beg of you,
When you reach the heavens blue,
Ask the Sun, how long must I
Suffer this disgrace, and why?
For what sins, let him explain,
Must I bear this grief and pain?”
“Yes, yes, Monster Whale, all right,”
Yelled Ivan with all his might,
While the whale, with bitter cries,
Begged Ivan, between his sighs:
“Please have pity on poor me—
These ten years I'm suffering, see—
Do this favour for me, do,



I will serve you some day too!”
“Yes, yes, Monster Whale, all right!”
Yelled Ivan with all his might.
Then his horse, with one leap bore
Vanya to the other shore,
Leaving clouds of dust behind
As he flew on like the wind.

Near or far, or high or low,
How they travelled, I don't know—
Nor did anybody say
If they saw them on the way;
Tales, you know, are quickly spun,
Deeds are sooner said than done;
Only, brothers, I did hear
(Indirectly, though, I fear)
That the humpback came to where
Earth meets sky; and it is there,
Peasant maidens, spinning flax,
Use the clouds as distaff racks.

Bidding Mother Earth good-bye,
Vanya rode up to the sky;
Like a prince, he proudly flew
Through the skies, his hat askew.
“What a wonder—Oh, I say,”
Mused Ivan aloud, as they
Rode the cloudy meadows blue—
“Though our country's pretty, too,
But compared with this blue sky,
It's not worth a button—why,
Our old Earth down there is so
Black and muddy, as you know;
Here, the soil is bright and blue,
And how brilliant it is, too!
But, my horse, what can that be



In the East, up yonder, see —
Gleaming like the dawn up there?
That must be, I do declare,
Nothing but the sun's chief city,
But — how high up, more's the pity!"
"That's the Tsar-Maid's tower you see,
Our Tsaritsa's that's to be,"
Neighed the humpback in his ear.
"Every night the Sun sleeps here,
And, here every day, the Moon
Comes to take her rest at noon."

Palace portals met their sight,
Crowned in crystal, gleaming bright;
All its pillars made of gold,
Twisted cunningly, and scrolled,
On each pillar shone a star;

Round the palace, near and far,
Fragrant gardens, fair to see,
Spread in verdant brilliancy.
Birds of paradise were singing
In their golden cages, swinging
'Mong the silver branches there.
Mansions rose there, tall and fair.
Stars upon the palace spire,
Burning with a holy fire,
Formed a Christian Cross, whose rays
Set the heavens all ablaze.

Through the portals then they rode
And Ivan, dismounting, strode
To the palace, with bare head.
There he saw the Moon, and said:
“Greetings, gracious Moon Moonovich,
I’m Ivanushka Petrovich
And from countries far away
Greetings I bring you today.”
“Take a seat, Ivan Petrovich,”
Murmured gracious Moon Moonovich,
“Tell me now, and let me know,
Why you left the Earth below
For our realms so bright and blue;
From what people, land are you?
How you found your way, confess—
Tell me all the truth, no less!”
“From a land on Earth I come
From a realm of Christiandom,”
Sitting down, Ivan replied.
“I have crossed the ocean wide
My Tsaritsa’s will to do—
In your palace, bow to you—
Then repeat these words—now hear:
‘Tell my darling mother dear

That her daughter down below,
On the Earth, desires to know
Why, for these three nights and days,
She conceals from her her rays;
Why my handsome brother shrouds
His bright face in gloomy clouds,
Never sending rays of love
From his misty heights above?
This is all—I think—though young,
She has got a silver tongue.
It's not easy to recall
Every word that she let fall.”
“Which Tsaritsa—who is she?”
“Why, the Tsar-Maid, don't you see?”
“What—our Tsar-Maid? You don't say
It was you stole her away?”
With a gasp cried Moon Moonovich.
And Ivanushka Petrovich
Answered: “Why, yes—surely Ma'am—
I'm the Royal Groom, I am.
And our Tsar gave me just three
Weeks to find and fetch her, see?
Otherwise, you see, he said,
I would lose my curly head.”
Here the Moon in glad surprise
Hugged Ivan and dried her eyes.
“Oh, Ivanushka Petrovich,”
Murmured gracious Moon Moonovich,
“You have brought such news today
That I don't know what to say;
When we lost our dear Princess,
How we mourned, you'll never guess;
That's the reason why, you see,
I've been grieving bitterly
These three nights and these three days,
In dark clouds concealed my rays;

All this time I mourned and wept,
Never ate a crumb, nor slept —
This is why her brother shrouds
His bright face in gloomy clouds;
Why he sends no warming rays
Down to Earth these many days,
Shedding many a bitter tear,
Mourning for his sister dear.
Let me know, though — is she well —
Is she homesick for us, tell?"

"She'd be pretty, I would say,
But she's wasting right away;
She's as skinny as can be,
Only skin and bones, you see —
When she's married, though, no doubt
She'll improve and get quite stout,
For the Tsar will wed her soon."

"What? The villain!" screamed the Moon —
"Why — he's eighty, if a day,
And he wants to wed with May!
I declare, upon my life,
She will never be his wife;
See what that old nasty toad
Wants — to reap, who never sowed.
Why, he's greedy as he's vain!"

Here Ivan spoke up again:
"Please do not deny this boon
For the whale, O gracious Moon —
O'er the ocean down below
Lies a Monster Whale, you know —
He is all one mass of holes,
From his ribs stick stakes and poles
And, poor thing, he begged me to
Speak for him when I saw you —
Why has he deserved this pain,
And how can he pardon gain?



Will he get his freedom soon?"
In reply, the lustrous Moon
Said: "He bears this punishment,
For, without the Lord's consent,
Thirty ships, one day, he swallowed
As their ocean course they followed.
If he sets them free again
God will take away his pain,
All his wounds He will assuage
And reward him with old age."

Here Ivan rose from his chair,
Said: "Farewell" with courtly air,
Thrice he kissed the bright Moon's face,
Clasping her in warm embrace.
"Well, Ivanushka Petrovich,"
Murmured gracious Moon Moonovich,
"Many, many thanks to you
From my son and from me, too;
Put my daughter's mind at ease
With my blessing, Vanya, please;
Tell my daughter that I say:
'Mother's with you night and day—
Cease from grieving—sigh no more—
Soon will end your sorrow sore,
For you'll never never wed
Any greybeard, toothless head,
But a young and handsome man.'
God be with you, now, Ivan."
Bowing low as best he knew,
Vanya climbed his humpback true,
Whistled like a noble knight,
Then rode back with all his might.

Next day, our Ivan once more
Came up to the ocean shore;

Clatter, clatter, clatter, clack
Rode he over that whale's back,
While the Monster-Marvel Whale
Sighed and slowly waved his tail,
Saying: "Sires—about my boon?
Will I get my freedom soon?"
But the humpback merely said:
"Wait, O Whale," and ran ahead
To the village market-place
Where he called the populace;
Tossed his coal-black mane and head,
Snorted thrice, and loudly said:
"Heed my words, O Christians true—
Mark what I am telling you—
If you wish to keep away
From a briny grave today,
Get you gone this minute, now;
Wonders will take place, I vow,
For the Monster Whale will turn
And the sea will seethe and churn."
Here the peasants, great and small,
Christians true—they one and all
Hurried off to home and farm,
Crying out in wild alarm;
Gathered all their carts, and placed
All their goods on them in haste
And, with many a woeful wail,
Fled from off that Monster Whale;
And, by noon, you could not find
Anybody left behind.
'Twas as though Mamai's fierce horde
Had swept the land with fire and sword.

O'er its tail the humpback sped,
Reached and bent down to its head,
Shouted loud as loud could be:

“Listen, Monster Whale, to me!
All this is your punishment —
For, without the Lord’s consent,
Thirty ships, one day, you swallowed
As their ocean course they followed;
If you set them free again
He will take away your pain,
All your wounds He will assuage,
And reward you with old age.”
And, when his long speech was said,
Bit his bridle, tossed his head,
Gave one leap — and lo, once more
Stood upon the distant shore.

Then the Monster Whale turned round,
Like a mighty heaving mound;
Threshed the ocean with his tail,
And a fleet of thirty sail
One by one cast from his jaws,
Sails and sailors, boats and oars.

Such a din here rent the deep
That the Sea-King woke from sleep.
Brazen guns in broadsides flashed,
Trumpets blared and cymbals crashed,
And the chaplain with his choir
Held a Mass amid the fire.
White sails were unfurled at last,
Flags flew gaily from each mast;
And the sailors sang this song
As they rowed their ships along:
“O’er the billows, o’er the sea,
O’er the ocean wide and free,
At the bottom of the world,
Fly our ships with sails unfurled.”



All the ships sailed out of view,
Hidden by the billows blue,
While the Monster-Marvel Whale
Threshed the waters with his tail,
Opened up his jaws so wide,
Lifted up his voice, and cried:
“Tell me, friends, what can I do
In return, or give to you?
Coloured sea-shells, do you wish?
Would you care for golden fish?

Lovely pearls? Oh — anything
You may ask for, I will bring.”
“No, O Whale-fish,” said Ivan,
“We don’t need them; if you can,
We would rather have you bring
Us the Tsar-Maid’s signet-ring
From the bottom of the sea,
For our Tsar’s bride that’s to be.”
“Certainly — for friends like you
There is nothing I won’t do;
Ere the sun sets, I will bring
You the lovely Maiden’s ring,”
Said the whale, and sank like lead
To the very ocean bed.

There, the Monster-Marvel Whale
Raised his voice and thumped his tail,
Called the tribe of sturgeons, and
Thus delivered his command:
“Ere the sun sets, you must bring
Me the Fair Tsar-Maiden’s ring
It is hidden in a chest.
Who fulfils this my behest
Will receive a title — he
Privy Counsellor will be;
But, if I am not obeyed,
On my word — I’ll have you flayed.”
At these words, the sturgeons bowed
And withdrew in order proud.

In another hour or so,
Two white sturgeons, swimming slow,
Humbly bending head and tail,
Thus addressed the Monster Whale:
“Be not wrathful, O great Tsar!
All the oceans, near and far,

We have searched and ploughed — but we
Of that ring no sign could see.
Of your subjects but one fish —
That's the perch — can do your wish;
He's at home in all the seas,
He will find that ring with ease;
But, perhaps it was in spite,
That he left his home last night."
"Have him found and brought to me
To my cabin, instantly,"
Thundered wrathfully the whale
Wiggling whiskers, fins and tail.

Bowing low, the sturgeons raced
To the county Court in haste;
There they had a Royal Writ
Drawn up instantly — to wit:
That the brawling perch, when caught,
To His Majesty be brought;
It was penned in copper-plate
By the bream, in duplicate;
And the sheat-fish (Counsellor)
Signed without the least demur;
Then the lobster and the eel
Sealed it with the Royal Seal,
Called a pair of dolphins, who
Were forthwith commissioned to
Institute a thorough search
For that vagrant brawling perch;
And, when they had found the same,
Seize him, in the Royal Name,
And immediately to hale
Him before the Royal Whale.
Here the dolphins bowed assent
And to seek the perch they went.

So they searched an hour, or more,
All the seas from shore to shore;
All the lakes they searched, and they
Searched each river, creek and bay
For the perch—but all in vain,
And, chagrined, turned back again,
Almost shedding tears for shame...

Suddenly, from somewhere came
Unexpectedly, a cry
(From a little pond nearby);
To the pond they turned, and they
Dived below without delay;
There, the perch in furious war
With a little carp they saw.
“Hist—the devil take you now,”
Roared the runners. “What a row!
One might think from your loud cries
You were fighting for a prize!”
“Who asked you to interfere?”
Cried the perch, who showed no fear.
“I’m no joker—for two pins
I would rip you with my fins.”

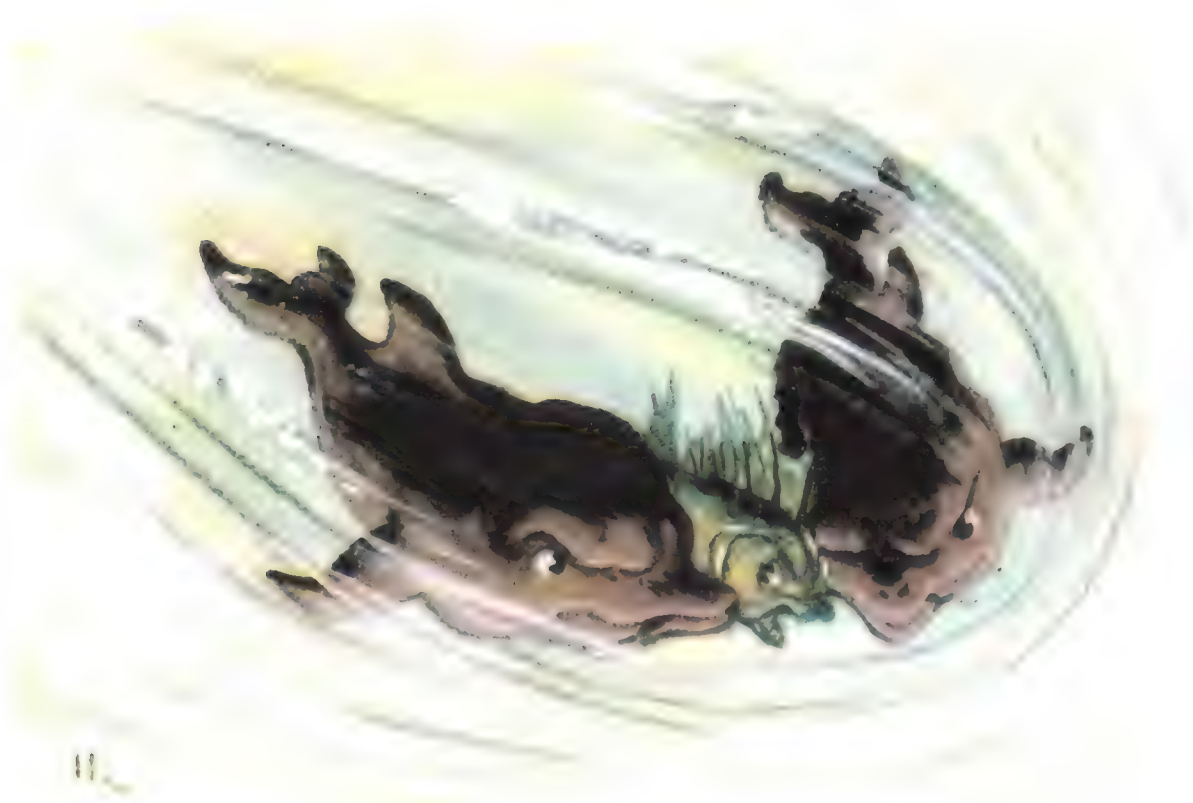
“Oh, you brawling vagabond,
You, of squabbling always fond—
You would only gad about,
Rascal you, and fight and shout!
Home and you just don’t agree!
But—why argue with you—see—
Here’s the Tsar’s ukase that you
Come to him without ado.”
Then they dragged the vagabond
By his whiskers, through the pond,
To the whale; the perch-fish, he
Yelled and struggled furiously:



“Brothers—let me give him one
Little punch, and I’ll be done!
Why, that carp-fish, publicly,
Yesterday insulted me,
Called me names, and cursed me, too—
Let me get at him, please do.”
Long and loud he shouted, till,
Willy-nilly, he grew still;
While the dolphins swam with him
Through the seas, in silence grim,
Hauling him by gills and fins
To the whale, for his black sins.

“Traitor’s son—what does this mean?
You are late—where have you been?”
Wrathfully roared out the whale,
And the perch, all meek and pale,
Begged for pardon on his fins
And confessed to all his sins.
“Well, I’ll pardon you this time,
If you expiate your crime
And fulfil my Royal Wish,”
Said the monarch of the fish.
“I shall only be too proud,”
On his fins, the perch squealed loud.
“You are always in and out
Of the oceans—and no doubt,
Saw the Tsar-Maid’s ring?” “Yea, yea!
I can find it straightaway.”
“Well, be off with you, and see
That you bring it instantly.”

Then the perch, with humble tail,
Bowed and left the Royal Whale;
Railed the servants to their face,
Tried to kiss a pretty dace,



Punched a dozen sprats in play,
Ere he went upon his way,
After which, he fearlessly
Dived into the slimy sea
And, from out the ocean-bed,
Dug a casket with his head
Weighing no less than a ton.
“This is easier said than done,”
Cried the perch; he gave a shout
For the herrings to come out.

Though the herrings did their best,
Pushed and crowded round the chest,
Squeaking, squeaking, high and low,
“Yo heave ho!” and “Yo, ho ho!”
All their efforts were in vain —

They grew hoarse from cries and strain,
While that casket still stuck fast
Till the perch cried out at last:
“You’re real herrings, yes indeed!
Vodka? Knouts is what you need!
Then, in dudgeon, quickly made
Off to seek the sturgeons’ aid.

All the sturgeons flocked around
And, without a single sound,
Raised the little jewel box
Stuck fast in the mud and rocks.
“Well, you fellows—just take care,”
Said the perch, “and now, repair
To the Tsar; while I shall go
Home, and take a rest below.
My poor eyes, they just can’t keep
Open—they’re so full of sleep...”
And the sturgeons, then and there,
Swam off to the Tsar with care,
While the brawling vagabond
Made his way toward the pond
(Whence he had been hauled away
Somewhat earlier that day)
Back to fight the carp, may be—
I can’t say—no fish told me.
But—forget him, if you can,
Let’s return to our Ivan.

Calm reigned on the ocean, and
Humming mournful, on the sand,
Vanya sat with great concern,
Waiting for the whale’s return;
On the beach, by Vanya’s side,
Slept his humpback true and tried.
Evening shadows fell apace,

And the Sun had run his race,
Tinged the heavens with the blaze
Of his slowly dying rays;
But — no token of the whale.
“May you rot from head to tail,
Nasty boaster,” cried Ivan.
“You deceiving sea-shaitan!
Promised faithfully you’d bring,
Ere night fell, the Tsar-Maid’s ring;
See — the Sun has almost set
And you haven’t brought it yet,
Liar...” Here, the ocean surged,
And the Monster Whale emerged;
“For the kindness you did me,
I have kept my promise — see,”
Quoth he to our Vanya, and
Plumped the casket on the sand,
So, the shore rocked to and fro.
“Now I’ve paid my debt, I’ll go,
But should you need me anew,
Call me, and I’ll come to you;
I’ll remember till I die
What you’ve done for me — good-bye!”
More than this, he did not say,
Gave one splash and swam away.

Humpbacked horse jumped up, awake,
Gave his mane and tail a shake,
At Ivanushka he glanced,
Turned a somersault, and pranced:
“Whale Whaleovich! Marvellous!
You have paid your debt to us!
Thank you, Monster Whale,” called out
Little humpback with a shout.
“Now, Ivan, do not delay —
Let’s be going on our way —

Three days have already passed
And tomorrow is our last.
Our old man will die of sorrow
If we don't get back tomorrow."
Said Ivan: "I've done my best,
But I cannot raise that chest—
I'd be very happy to,
But it's more than I can do—
Though I tried three times to lift it,
Yet I couldn't even shift it;
It must hold at least a score,
Or a hundred fiends, or more."
Here his horse, without a sound,
Raised the casket from the ground
To his neck, with one light kick,
And then said: "Now, mount me, quick—
Time is nearly up, you know,
And we still have far to go."

Horse and rider, tired and worn,
Reached the palace gates at dawn.
And the Tsar ran out to meet him—
"Where's my ring?" was all his greeting.
Vanya got off from his horse,
Proudly answered: "Here, of course,
And a little casket, too.
Call the guards, though, for—look you,
Yes, it may seem small, but yet
It could crush the fiend, I'll bet."
So the guards were called, and they
Took the jewel box away;
Then the Tsar, he forthwith sped
To the Tsar-Maid, and he said
In a sweet and tender voice:
"Dear, your ring is found—rejoice!
Now, permit me to repeat



There's no obstacle, my sweet,
 To prevent us, O my life,
 From becoming man and wife
 In the morning; but, my dear,
 Come and see, your ring is here."
 "Yes, I know, I know," she said.
 "Still—we cannot yet be wed."
 "Why can you not be my wife?
 Why? I love you more than life;
 And, forgive my boldness, do,
 I just want to marry you.
 If you don't ... at dawn tomorrow
 I shall die of grief and sorrow!
 O, Tsaritsa—pity me!"
 But the Tsar-Maid said, said she:
 "Only look—you're old and grey—
 I'm but fifteen and a day—
 We can't marry—if we do,
 All the tsars will laugh at you,
 Saying—there goes youth with age."
 But the Tsar replied in rage:
 "Mock me? Only let them dare—
 They won't laugh again, I swear!
 I shall put them all to flight—
 Kith and kin to death I'll smite!"
 "Even then," the Tsar-Maid said,
 "You and I cannot be wed.
 I won't marry you—remember
 Roses don't bloom in December;
 I am beautiful—let's see—
 What can you boast of to me?"
 Quoth the Tsar: "I may be old
 Yet I am both gay and bold.
 When I dress myself a bit
 Everybody will admit
 That I'm handsome as can be.

But—what need of this?" said he,
"If but you and I be wed."
But the Tsar-Maid merely said:
"Never, never in my life
Will I ever be the wife
Of an old, old man like you,
Grey-haired, ugly, toothless, too!"
Frowning, as he scratched his head,
Here the old Tsar only said:
"Now, whatever shall I do?
How I want to marry you!
Yet the only thing you say
Is, for ever Nay and Nay!"
But again the Tsar-Maid said:
"Grey hairs I shall never wed!
You regain your youth anew,
And I'll gladly marry you."
"O, Tsaritsa, dear—look here—
One can't be reborn, I fear,
Only God works wonders, see."
Then the Tsar-Maid said, said she:
"If you have no fear of pain,
You will soon be young again.
Listen—early in the morn,
On the palace court-yard lawn,
You must have three cauldrons ready,
Two—on fires burning steady;
Now, the first one must be filled
To the brim, with water chilled;
While the next—with water hot—
Have it boiled there on the spot;
Then, with milk fill up the last,
Heat it, till the milk boils fast;
If you wish to marry me,
Young and handsome wish to be,
First you must your robes divest,

Plunge into the milk, undressed;
Next, in boiling water; then,
In the water cold — and when
You emerge — believe me, you
Will be young and handsome too!”

All the Tsar did was to say
That his groom come straightaway.
“Are you sending me once more,”
Cried Ivan, “off to the shore?
No, Your Majesty — not if
I can help it — I’m still stiff,
As it is — no, I won’t go!”
“No,” the Tsar said — “No, no no —
Listen, now — tomorrow morn
On the palace court-yard lawn
I will have three cauldrons filled:
One will have cold water, chilled;
In the second cauldron pot
There’ll be water, boiling hot;
While with milk I’ll fill the last,
Heating it till it boils fast.
You, Ivan, must do your best —
These three cauldrons you must test —
First bathe in the milk, my son,
Then the waters, one by one.”
“Listen to his blarney,” said
Vanya, and he shook his head.
“Chickens, pigs, and turkeys — yes —
People scald them, I confess;
I’m no pig or turkey, though,
Nor a chicken, as you know.
Now, a cold bath — why that’s quite
Different and, I’ll say, all right;
As to being boiled alive —
You can’t tempt me — don’t you strive;



But—enough, Your Majesty—
Don't you make a fool of me.”
Wrathfully, the Tsar's beard shook—
“What—me argue with you? Look!
If my bidding be not done
With the rising of the sun,
I will have you drawn and quartered,
Tortured on the wheels and slaughtered!
Off with you, you wretched plague, you!”
Shivering as with the ague,
Vanya to the hayloft crept,
Where his little humpback slept.

“Why, Ivanushka, so sad?
Why so downcast, then, my lad?
Has our bridegroom found another
Task for you, my little brother?”
Said his horse. Ivan, in tears,
Kissed his little horse’s ears,
Held his neck in close embrace
As the tears rolled down his face.
“Woe is me, my horse,” sobbed he,
“He will be the death of me;
Now I’ve got to bathe, undressed,
In three cauldrons, for a test;
In the first, there’s water, chilled;
Next, with boiling water’s filled;
In the third—milk, scathing hot.”
“Yes that *is* a task you’ve got,”
Said his horse. “For this, you need
All my friendship, yes, indeed;
Your misfortunes are the price
Of refusing my advice;
Thank that evil feather for
All you woes and sorrows sore.
But, God bless you—do not cry—
We will manage, you and I.
I would sooner perish, than
Leave you in the lurch, Ivan.
Listen, lad—tomorrow morn,
When you strip there on the lawn,
Say: ‘Your Gracious Majesty!
Please to send my horse to me
So that I can say good-bye
To my horse before I die.’
Now, I know he will agree
And he’ll send a groom for me.
I will wave my tail about,
In each cauldron, dip my snout;

Then I'll squirt upon you, twice,
Whistle long and loudly thrice;
You—be sure to look alive,
In the milk then quickly dive,
Then—in waters hot and cold
Dive, just as you have been told.
Now, my lad, go, say your prayers,
Sleep in peace, forget your cares.”

Dawn had scarce begun to peep,
Humpback roused Ivan from sleep:
“Hey, my lad, stop snoring, do!
Up! Your duty's calling you!”
So Vanyusha scratched his head,
Yawned, and scrambled out of bed,
Crossed himself and said a prayer,
Sauntered to the court-yard, where,
Near the cauldrons, in a row,
Sat the servants, high and low—
Princes, dukes, and lords and pages,
Cooks and coachmen, fools and sages—
Sat and whispered with a smile
And discussed Ivan, the while
Logs were fed on to the fire
So that it should not expire.

Then the portals opened wide
And the Tsar, with his young bride,
Came to watch there, with the rest,
How Ivan would stand the test.
And the Tsar called out: “Ivan,
Now, undress yourself, my man—
Dive, and bathe without delay
In those cauldrons there, I say!”
Vanya stripped—no word said he,
And the young Tsaritsa, she

Veiled herself right then and there
So as not to see him bare.
To the cauldrons Vanya sped,
Peered inside, and scratched his head.
While the Tsar said: "Now, Ivan—
Come on—do your duty, man!"
Said Ivan: "Your Majesty,
Please do send my horse to me
So that I can say good-bye
To my horse, before I die."
Pondering o'er this request,
Graciously he acquiesced,
And the Tsar was pleased to send
For Vanyusha's faithful friend,
And Ivan then said adieu
To his humpbacked horse so true.

Humpback waved his tail about,
In each cauldron dipped his snout,
Then he squirted on him twice,
Whistled long and loudly thrice;
Vanya gave his horse one look,
Then a deep, long breath he took,
After which, as he was told,
In each cauldron dived, full bold.
In and out he dived, and when
He emerged—no words nor pen
Could describe him—he was so
Handsome, I should have you know.
Then he dried himself, and dressed,
To the Tsar-Maid bowed his best,
Glanced around with haughty air,
No prince handsomer, you'd swear.

"What a wonder—did you ever?"
Cried the crowd, and—"Well I never!"



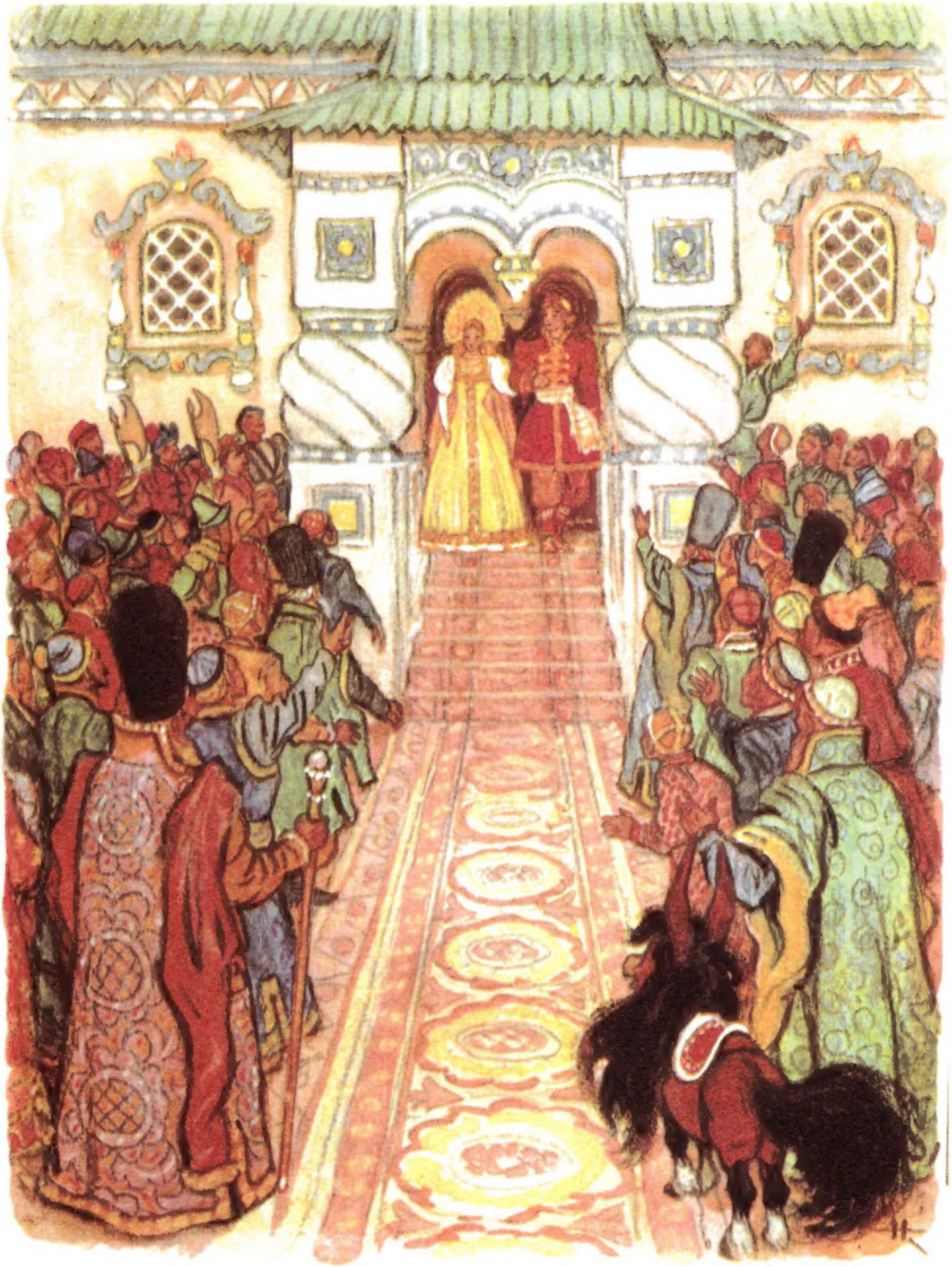
Hastily the Tsar undressed,
Twice and thrice he crossed his breast,
Dived into the cauldron pot
And was boiled there on the spot!

Here the Tsar-Maid stood up, and
Called for silence with her hand;
Then, unveiling her fair face,
Thus addressed the populace:
“Listen, now! The Tsar is dead —
Will you have me in his stead?
Am I pleasing in your eyes?
Speak! If so, then recognise
As the lord of all the land,
My beloved husband” — and,
Pointing to Ivan, she placed
Her fair arm around his waist.

“We are willing!” all replied —
“We would die for you!” they cried —
“For the sake of your sweet eyes,
Tsar Ivan we’ll recognise.”

Hand in hand, the Royal pair —
Tsar, and young Tsaritsa fair —
To the holy altar sped,
And in God’s church they were wed.

Cannons from the castle flashed,
Trumpets blared and cymbals crashed;
From the cellars, then and there,
Casks were rolled with vintage rare.
And all night the drunken throng
Shouted out in merry song:
“Long live Tsar Ivan!” they cried,
“And the Fair Tsar-Maid, his bride!”



In the palace, mirth held sway,
Wines like water flowed that day,
And before the groaning boards
Princes drank with Dukes and Lords.
'Twas a pleasure! I was there,
Mead and wine I drank, I swear;
Though my whiskers bathed in wine,
Nothing passed these lips of mine.

THE END



